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Excerpts from *al-Sayyid Asghar Akbar*. "The Siege of Najaf" and "The Theory"

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Murtedha GZAR

Excerpts from *al-Sayyid Asghar Akbar*

The Siege of Najaf

Three reconnaissance aircrafts were sent from the ILA-55 base. One flew east over the haystacks seven miles away from the city, and one was destroyed and fell down in the Sea of Najaf, thanks to the undertakers and coffin porters who beleaguered it with their lies. Yet the diaries of Hasanali Bakubki, in which he analyzed the wiggling of the tail of Ms. Gertrude Bell's dog in her tent during the visits of some of the city's notables, reveal that the two aircrafts returned safely to their base and were welcomed by the friendly bullets of the Indian cavalry. These diaries, which were sold in the book auction after the invasion of the city and the conclusion of the siege for three thousand Rupees, moreover state what the gossip of the elderly had already confirmed: the third reconnaissance aircraft hovered over the dome of Imam Ali's Shrine and the gold rumbled beneath it while Ayatollah al-Damad was raising his hands to pray before hundreds of worshipers. Upon hearing the roar of its propellers, he looked up and heaved a long sigh. It was actually a gasp that was later described as a "knockout", after which he fell unconscious. Two hours later his soul left this world.

The third aircraft was incinerated. It blew up into hot flames that were described in the pamphlets as the red shrapnel of hell.

At the time, Captain Marshall was proofreading a thank you note he had written in reply to Major Balfour, governor of Karbala, commending him for his valuable advice on the need to respect the holy city and show the finest of veneration to its esteemed religious scholars—the 'ulama. Next door, his Dutch doctor had finished his reply to the ornithologist at the University of Dublin. He was still uneasy about his descriptions of the mute larks of the Imam Shrine, and about his discussion of the curses that inflict the hungry person who contemplates hunting them.

It did not occur to the reply writers that the Bedouin postman would not come on that day to take the last of their letters. Captain Marshall had not yet received the news of the robbery of the tannery next door to the Bureau of the Ottoman government which his armies had occupied. Yet jokes in Urdu were resounding in the Bureau about the meaning of robbing goat wool and hide in circumstances like these and under this flaming sky.

In the evening, the sheep sneaked out to the open, arrived to the gate of the Bureau and knocked ferociously. The Indian security man said to his superior that it was the postman. When he returned to open the gate, he received a stab that knocked him down on the ground, after which Hajj Najm the grocer entered while removing the wool from his clothes. He looked for Captain Marshall. Marshall, his doctor, and a third person whose identity the news did not specify were all sleeping in the hallway of the Bureau. Before Hajj Najm the grocer and his band could attack them and remove their covers, Marshall, the doctor, and the third person pointed their pistols. Some of the insurgents were injured, others were killed, and others fell from the tower, which they failed to climb. But Hajj Najm was able to point the nozzle of his rifle at Marshall's head. His companions did the same with the doctor and the third person. Beyond the city walls the hands of the clock of the bell tower were waking up to the voices of undertakers and the calls of grocers and poison merchants. The last of the worshipers in the Shrine Mosque, Sayyid Asghar Akbar, 2 shook the darkness of the previous night off his prayer rug, folded it, and went out to the house of the Sister Wives in order to make up with his first wife for having brought her a sister-wife who did not like to read and did not know in which direction to turn the quern.

Not too far from his usual path in front of Sagha Mosque, Hajj Najm the grocer was displaying fruits and vegetables that were not fresh, and calling to sell them for the lowest of prices. He told his assistant to repeat this refrain: “buy the best produce in this market. Our goods are patient and love to huddle in the shade. Our watermelon is shy and forced us to close shop for five days. Our cucumber is grouchy so do not approach, oh reader of The Compendium of Happinesses!” His assistant was funnier than him or more spontaneous. He made himself another refrain that had nothing to do with the difficult night he spent strangling Indians, “eat this produce and add a flavor to your farts!”

The grocer’s young conspirator friends peacefully sneaked into their homes and wives’ laps, and then dissolved in the dust of the city and lurked within its ruins. As for the middle-aged men and the ungrateful sons of notables, they returned to help the ulama and clerks dish out hospitality to the English, or “Meriam’s brothers,” as they were called by the city’s genealogists.

Sayyid Asghar Akbar, who had defeated these genealogists and shut down their gatherings and their silk cloaks with his new theory of future genealogies, that morning Asghar Akbar was trying, with his contracted air, to emerge safely from another labor that did not resemble the labor of the murder of Captain Marshall and the subsequent escalating crises of anger against the masked insurgents. Nor was it the attempt of Mrs. Rumiyya to light herself up with the heavy oil that was brought for her husband from the Lheys desert in Basra as an expensive gift in return for drawing a future tree for a falcon hunter who had ten daughters and one son who peed diagonally. Nor was that labor about the quick capture of some of the grocer’s companions, or the excitement of many students and market vendors about a prize that was announced by the successor of the betrayed Captain, Major Balfour the governor of Karbala. Not this and not that.

The turncoats were spending some alms on buying the roles of the defectors and quarters of future trees. When they failed to sway the new employees of the grandfather’s office, they threatened to write a fatwa that would issue from the distant marshes to the ‘alim, the big religious scholar, in the adjacent alleyway. In it they would write a complaint and elicit the anger of the ‘alim who would write to them: “what is commonplace today, in the writing of future trees, is forbidden and void, and to God is the full knowledge.” Yet Abu Sabzi just kicked them out. As soon as he mentioned the name of Asghar Akbar’s apprentice, the seasoned gangster Finjan Abu Nasiha,³ they ran away and their feet gobbled the tiled floors of the vaults. Only few of them laughed or made a foul sound by way of ridiculing the defunct gangster who wrote love ruba’iyyat.⁴

Rumiyya insisted that her husband let her live alone in a big sea-wood house that he had bought two years ago in Baghlat Abbas.⁵ Our grandfather agreed and promised her to visit twice a week. She, in turn, agreed to his condition, which was to take their son, Khunsur Ali, with him to Kufa every Friday, to Basra every year, and to the Tawya area every Saturday.

The child with the diagonal pee arch was able to gain the favor of his mother with the green tattoo dots under her mouth. His lines extended straight and sturdy from the thick tree that Sayyid Asghar Akbar promised. On that tree he was to beget enough boys to pollinate the daughters of their uncles in Najd, who would bear children who would soften the pebbles of the dessert with their supple feet as they played ‘miqlaa,’ their exciting raid-with-pebbles game.

The new labor was in the needle of Hasanali Bakubki’s balance scale.

Its needle did not stop pointing to number “zero” when the greatest merchants in the auction tried to weigh ten tomes of the book, Questions of the Shirazis.

The book vendor himself—a short and fat man with a potbelly that extended from his neck to his knees—he, too, according to the needle of the balance scale weighed zero.

“Zero, like the point of the cloackmaker’s needle,” one of the turbaned passersby said as he carried a watermelon with cuts like dagger stabs on his shoulder.

"This animal has been drinking date syrup," the voice of the concierge of the Shrine's golden gutters answered him.

No one saw the gutter concierge as he hurried to spread a rumor near the ablution basin of the Lion Gate. He was a lightweight man who paced up and down the circumference of the Imam's Shrine. With a leg, a cane, and a tireless mouth he distributed news, fatwas, and messages without receiving any payment or alms in return. No one asked him about the truth of what he told, because the occupation of standing near the gutter of the golden Shrine, which was handed down from his forefathers, was not once filled by someone who was asked about the truth of his news.

Before the city shook with the news of the assassination of the Captain, scattered queues of students, servants, effendis, and carriage drivers were wiping the soles of their feet for the pan of Hasanali Bakubki's balance scale. He did not ask his customers to clean their feet before mounting the pan, but the mud of the roads prompted them to do so, especially since the cries of the market vendors picked up on every funny-looking foot or uncouth behavior.

The pan without someone mounting it rose a little above zero. This rise was the weight of the humid air, said Hasanali, or the thick dust that last week's rains did not manage to saddle, or the weight of the gentle creatures that are invisible to outlaws and perpetrators of great sins.

"All sins are great," the concierge of the gutters said after returning from his rounds.

When a man climbed up, the point of the hand went down to zero, making a soft rattle that dispersed people's eyes left and right. Not one intelligible word had been uttered to this minute by way of commenting on this phenomenon. The most eloquent among the onlookers uttered one syllable in bewilderment while Hasanali finished weighing twenty men, pronouncing a single weight for each of them, one that did not go past the "point of the cloackmaker's needle." He tried to repeat the same thing with books, newspapers, and magazines. He weighted a heap of issues of the Najafi religious magazine, 'Ilm, and some of those closer up in the lines helped him stack and secure the issues on the scale.

"Why did we fall and how do we ascend?" Hasanali said as he gazed at the dot of the zero. When he noticed that the eyes were staring at him without caring about the scale's zero, he pointed to the number in the headline of one of the protruding papers. The gutter concierge repeated, "Why did we fall and how do we ascend?"

Maybe the queue dispersed and Hasanali had some time alone with his machine. It was said that he escaped to Baghlat Abbas after the black banners were hung over the minarets, indicating the beginning the bitter siege. It was also said that he returned alone and was able to circumvent the Sikh cavalry from Mt. Hawish's side, and was able to enter the city and depict with his quill some of the small battles and the exchange of hand grenades on the two sides. What was agreed upon is that his machine remained inside the city and did not cross the wall. That is because the song that the boys sang as they lugged a soldier from the English army mentions that they looked for Hasanali's scale all day, and were unable to find out the soldier's weight.

Perhaps Baghlat Abbas was one of the calmest spots on those days, especially since a dozen of runaway madwomen, after the attack on the mental asylum and the escape of its director, headed toward the auspices of Baghlat Abbas and made themselves nests from date tree fronds there, because the original inhabitants used up all the wood of Captain Abbas' vessel. The madwomen were calm, picking out lice from each other's heads. With the exception of six or seven who committed suicide or succumbed to fever, most of them survived and lived to a ripe old age, although our mother who told us a lot about them and about their grandchildren did not describe them or mention their ages. Most likely they became second wives of some of the undertakers who went complaining to the Englishmen about the oppression of their bosses.

During these days of siege, Baghlat Abbas grew and its narrow roads crowded with blackness. If someone looks at our father's notebooks now, he would enjoy those classifications and

subsection headings that he included with his blueprint of the island's development. He wrote three pages about some of the newcomers of those days, under the title "People of the Bell." The English had attached a small bell with an enchanting sound to the barbed wire with which they enclosed the city. Whenever someone tried to get away, he usually forgot about the bell, but he heard it as the last beautiful sound in his life. As for those who attempted to escape and thought of crossing quietly past the wires and the bell, those were the ones for whom a new life was inscribed. The newcomers to Baghlat Abbas, my father on top of the list that contains a host of savvy people, were the ones who escaped peacefully during the siege days. Our father said that the cloak maker, the teacher of our grandfather's first trade, died on the seventh night of the siege, during the fierce attack on the young men's trenches in Mt. Hawish. Also on that day, our grandfather became the owner of a small owl that was confused during the raids on the mountain and had fallen as a result. As he was dragging its limping legs, the young men who had surrendered picked him up as they raised their white banners and prepared to seek shelter in the homes of some notables. The soldier who handed it to our grandfather fell dead seconds later. The English themselves killed him, as it was difficult for them to see their agents capitulate.

The owl was calm throughout the siege period. He stood on the galleys staring at Finjan Abu Nasiha and casting dashing looks on his master, Asghar Akbar.

"Mr. Finjan," Asghar Akbar said as he sat the owl in his lap, "how much time do you need to tie together the tree of Shinyar the washer's tribe?"

"I don't need time. I need letters. We're out of lead sorts"

"And I need sleep."

Sayyid Asghar Akbar went to his bed, lifted the covers off the torso of his Caucasian wife "Beyond," and clung to it as if climbing a tree. He realized, thanks to experience, that this trunk belonged to a western thicket, at least the yonder west. It could not possibly be eastern or northeastern! He moved the covers farther away and his eyes widened:

"How did you get past the wall, daughter of the pipesman?"

"I didn't. They destroyed the homes that surrounded it, the women escaped, the children scattered, and all the men were killed. I slipped into a marching crowd of old women from Shinyar the washer's family."

It was Rumiyya.

She did not let him search for the faces of the old women she hid in some of the rooms and cells of the vault. She drew him to her body until he licked the last slice of fruit.

During the day, a group of townsfolk were resisting the insurgents on the inside, looking for them in the drains and wells that the builders of Kufa had filled in. During the other hours of the day, the insurgents themselves were making surveillance rounds, looking for those who were looking for them, or searching for weapons to bolster their ammunition, or a handful of Basra dates to sustain their hollow stomachs with.

Because Sayyid Asghar Akbar hosted more than twenty-one old women from the Shinyar family—the most famous dead washers in the land—after the English had killed their young women and he had completed their future tree and filled it with righteous offspring, he was far from the insurgents' suspicion. However, according to Hasanali's calculations and other scribes and trusted sources, he was a suspect as far as his connections with the English were concerned. What most supported their strange views was the fact that the English soldiers pointed the nozzle of a large cannon toward the neighborhood of Sabat Darwish and the rest of the quarters in the city, after positioning it behind exactly in front of the house of the Sister Wives.

When news arrived that five hundred more homes were destroyed, Sayyid Asghar Akbar went down to check on the old women of the washer's family, carrying a galley overflowing with grilled meat that was not beef or lamb but donkey meat. It was a common dish sold openly during those hard times. When he went near them they burst with tears. The owl flew away

from him to land on the waist of a reclining old woman. Perhaps this owl or one of its descendants was named "Dr. Shinyar" for that reason.

When he was summoned to be among the ten notables who were to stand behind the wall to watch with their own eyes how the British missiles were bombing the trenches of the insurgents and shying away from the holly spot, he hurried with his trees, which were written by lead sorts in galleys and not yet inked. The English asked him to record the trajectory of the missiles in his notebook and to write a couple of sentences confirming that the army did not bomb mosques and schools. He did, but his mind was not really there. It was not inside the walled city either. He returned the notebook to the officer with five words, transcribed literally from the words of the translator of the officer's instructions.

His mind was looking not at the rebels, but for his rebellious letters because Najm the grocer's band stole thousands of lead sorts from his office. Some of his future trees became ammunition for the fighters. The wheels of the smelteries were turned on at night, and the banging of hammers was heard in the smiths' quarter. The day following that incident, the insurgents sniped the necks of some Indians and missed others.

"The bullets were not loaded well and often fell from the nozzles before they were fired. They killed a woman who was squeezing a date for her infant in the neighborhood," Beyond said to her sister-wife, Rumiyya, as she prepared to sneak back into Baghlat Abbas.

"I knew you would speak Arabic better than me," replied Rumiyya.

When Sayyid Asghar Akbar signed beneath the statement that the 'ulama sent to Major Balfour eliciting his sympathy and the benevolence of the Great Kingdom, his pen was shaking and wanted to add a footnote saying, please look into my calamity and see into it that my lead sorts are returned even if as bullets or cartridges."

Our mother, Shamkha, said that some of the looted lead sorts were not used for combat. They were witnessed outside the city's sixth gate and many of them arrived to Baghlat Abbas and were scattered and lost among its new dwellers. And because they had arrived as lined up words with some letters loosened or lost, they were repeated by the madwomen and the little boys during the hour of dusk. Other incomplete words became opening verses for songs that were set to strange music. Our mother tried to cite some examples but her mind drifted for a good while. It is because she was young, and we were young too, when she told us these stories during the days of siege and high traffic on the island. What we have not managed to understand until now is her detailed explanation of some of the words in our native dialect. She tried to prove to us that some of our everyday expressions were taken from the lead sorts of the looted printing press, from the leftovers that were not good enough for bullets and rifle cartridges.

We remembered that whenever we talked to one of the townsfolk. When we grew up, went to school, and wandered around in the alleyways looking for hairdressers and wax women, we used to feel the great difference between the two dialects.

The siege lasted a whole month and ten days during which we celebrated Nowruz,⁶ or "Christmas Day," as our mother called it, imitating her mother-in-law, Rumiyya. Our grandfather's vault succumbed to recession. Finjan Abu Nasiha disappeared after leaving a long letter composed with what remained of unused sorts, telling his master that doubt was eating into his brain's folds, or his internal turban, as he wrote, and that staying with him would have required one of two things: killing his master or turning him over to the insurgents. According to Finjan's future tree, his lineage was supposed to conclude that year. No family would be known to him and no offspring. When we looked for his Ruba'iyyat, we found that some of them were written with nibbled words, from which we understood nothing. Now we only remember the bits and pieces of verse that our family transmitted orally.

Mother Shamkha said that the real reason behind Finjan's indignation was finding the ancestors of his beloved wife on the plagued trees. Those were drafts that our grandfather had sketched for bygone, omitted generations. It was not possible to delve deeper into their

history and therefore it was not possible to move forward into predicting their future with clarity. When epidemics and fierce battles ate up a particular tree, it became difficult, according to the great genealogist, to bridge the wide gap that appeared in the history of these plighted tribes.

Finjan did not argue with his master. He did not ask him about the hundreds of obsolete roots for which he had found solutions or about the customers whose grandfathers were sterile and how he managed to treat them with the antidotes of his tried theory.

When the siege half passed, and after the business of the genealogist began picking up again, Finjan broached the topic once more. He approached him while he was busy deleting the pedigree of the insurgents and chopping off their branches. So he was asked to be silent at that moment.

"I'm silent. I learned from you that connecting fathers with sons is God's will that He bestows on some of those He loves, and that he who does so walks in God's steps, and thus must connect the trees while he's silent."

"Good job, my boy. Then come here and help me find the wife of this grandfather. But remember as you sift through these paper heaps that the second pillar of our theory is that mothers are..."

"...the keynote for the smart genealogist."

"You too will be smart but watch out for my son Khneisir."⁷

Sayyid Asghar Akbar laughed and the heap of trees ruffled under his feet. Finjan repeated in a forlorn voice whose letters were looted from his mouth, "I only wanted to draw one tree." Before the war with Iran started, or soon after according to Mu'ina, the government decided to remove the hand whose palm carried the inscription, "God's hand over their hands." That hand was the only hand that vied with Finjan's in dealing heavy slaps. We might be able to see now, from the small window, if we went up to the kitchen, the golden pomegranate that came to replace it forty years after the disappearance of Finjan Abu Nasiha in the vault of "Ishqiyan," which not only leads to the grave of his beloved, but also to the graves of Adam, Hud, Salih—our forefathers who, news had it, were also buried in Imam Ali's Shrine.

The Theory

Three things are crucial for understanding Sayyid Asghar Akbar's theory. The first is future genealogies, and . . . the second and third we will discuss later. 'Future genealogies' does not refer to the belief that humans are begotten from their future ancestors, no. Nor does it mean that the first man of each family tree is in the future, that we are moving towards him, and that our ancestors will beget him in the upcoming years, thereby causing the human race to conclude and begin at once, no. Nor does it mean that some curse has befallen the hourglass of time and turned it upside down, or that some devil kicked the clock's arms and made them move in the opposite direction of the original, no. Nor does it mean that the trees drawn contrariwise by our grandfather prove that we are propagating inversely, not at all.

It doesn't mean this, and it doesn't mean that, and it doesn't mean the thousands of superstitions that were attributed to it. We would need a thousand words for "no" if we went on speaking in this vein, which Mu'inah—the sentinel of our letter sorts—has ruled out. We

know the theory is still mysterious, like the cheese culture that Wāḥidiyyah makes. Like a piece of cheese, it is difficult to digest. Yet it is delicious like the starter. It is an unfinished yet forceful theory at the same time. It applies to all, and none of the senior genealogist's clients upon which our grandfather tested it has ever complained about its results. Still, to avoid confusion, we must simplify this part of the theory. Our grandfather's theory has eluded many beginners, made some of them dizzy and caused them to resort to metaphysical realms for explanation. In the end, their mothers tied them up to the columns of the roof terrace in order to let the jinni whose who had possessed them, as they claimed, leave their bodies. We too are trying to understand our grandfather. We began reading some articles and scientific treatises written about him. At this point, we have not arrived at an in-depth understanding. But what we know now suffices for the chatter in the galleys, and that is all we aim for. In short, then, our grandfather intentionally made a forward procession in time whenever he intended to produce a tree for a given family. When he was starting out, it used to take Grandfather a long time before he asked a client about his ancestors and pedigree. He sometimes spent two to three weeks sketching his vision of a future tree for the family, and then he would slide down from the future to the past until he reached a historical period suitable for the fee paid by the client, the cheapest of which was the Abbasid era and the days of Shah Khudabanda,¹¹⁷ and the most expensive of which was the era of Cain, Abel, Sam, and Japheth.¹¹⁸ As for the wealthy, honorable clients from notable families, he used to present them with family trees that go back to the Primordial Covenant and to the contract between the disembodied human race and God before creation.

He did this in return for a large sum that would not be enough for Mu'īnah to buy a bra or Mangi Breast Enhancement with today, but was sufficient then for building two Persian-tiled domes on top of Grandfather's house.¹²⁰ After agreeing on the required genealogical span, Grandfather asks about the clan and the available chain of ancestors. He then takes off his ring, opens its jointed turquoise gem, seals the contract with his ring,¹²¹ and shakes the client's hand. He promises the client that he will complete the tree three days before the deadline on the contract. He later became smarter and handed out a tree every two days, as long as the clients were familiar and several of them were linked to the same ancestor. In fact, all of his clients could be traced back to the same tree in bygone times. This helped him considerably and made him delegate the duplicate trees to his assistant Finjān. Finjān Abū Naṣīḥah,¹²² that "ex-gangster," as the townsfolk called him, excelled in the vocation and found it easier than any other work he had attempted before. After laboring intensively on copying the similar trees and linking them to the trees made by his master, Finjān found himself memorizing the names of ancestors and dynasties—Arab and foreign—by heart. He no longer needed to review his work, and when several months passed during which he worked continuously throughout the day, he began composing his Rubā'iyyāt¹²³ about his deceased wife at night. An idea was then born in his mind and heart to teach himself how to retrace his beloved's genealogy back to that of her mother, Eve .

Demand increased, and the sign "genealogist" hung over the door of the house with a copper wire because all of the wool yarn that they tried to use was slashed by the winds of his competitors, the traditional genealogists. Their envy and rumors bolstered his business, so he introduced improvements and new future-related offers, new methods that he claimed to be scientific rather than prognostic, as well as unrelated to divination and definitely having nothing to do with soothsaying. He then taught his assistant some verbal clichés to convince people and curb their hesitation to try out the new offers. He also convinced Finjān to forego his intimidating stare and the habit of gripping the clients' necks when he welcomed them into the shop or tried to be nice to them. He taught him a gentle style of shaking hands and delivering trees to their owners, forbidding him to squeeze the palms of turbaned clients. Aṣghar Akbar tried to justify starting the tree from bottom to top by means of the procedure

that he followed, a precise procedure that some explained and summarized in equations and mathematical functions. These have since been developed and transformed into highly complicated formulas. Yet they do not carry his name. Nothing carries his name now, not even the door of Imam 'Alī's shrine presented to him by Ḥājjah Ṭakḥkḥah, mother of the Shaykh of Fatghāwīs, with his name written in gold leaf on it, along with a host of other names that the Ḥājjah liked because their owners endorsed her mentally challenged son's shaykh status. The door was thrown out ten years ago during renovations. We, his granddaughters, also do not carry his name. Our father Khunṣur changed the family's fourth name two years after his death, claiming that our grandfather had asked him to do so in his will. We began writing our names in school: Naẓmah, Mu'īnah, Wāḥidiyyah Khunṣur 'Alī Shīḥān Dhākīr. But we continued to say his name and use it to swear at home. Some families here still refer to us by our old name. Some have tried to philosophize statements that appear in old anonymous lectures. This is proof enough that they belong to our grandfather Aṣghar Akbar. These statements deal with the calculation of future progeny, and are adorned with arrows and symbols that point to the ages of hypothetical members who will be conceived by the family and live in the future. Nonetheless, the speedy scientific developments in the field of genetics did not leave space for a philosophical meditation on these opinions, which are considered bizarre and backward these days. Yet they were debatable if not acceptable back then when the newspapers were banned, their editors accused of heresy, and their cartoonists of licentiousness. As our father mentions, several theories used to appear in Najaf attempting to explain the universe and the movement of people and their fates. Some of them were stupid and naïve, so they received much attention. Others were considered serious and infallible, so their holders were exiled from Najaf. In order to harass them, tens of fatwas were issued to refute their ideas.¹²⁴ During the long meetings that he used to hold in offices, mosques, and his vault, our grandfather delved into his theory, expanded it, and slowly modified it. In the past, the theory consisted of merely conjuring up future phantoms to determine lineage in accordance with the genetic complexion and physiognomy of the client. They were hypotheses based on principles and theses that he hatched in his head. It was no one's fault if they missed the point. He holds in his hand a Russian patula tree that he had brought from the inaugural ceremony of the Russian Consulate at the time. He removes the leaves, ties to each small branch a small piece of paper, and each paper carries a hypothetical name. He cuts off some of the branches that do not align with the pattern of human reproduction. He tells the people assembled in his office, "let's imagine this is the clan of the man standing by the door." He points to a passerby who hesitates to enter. Those who are present in his vault nod their heads, and those who are in the front row say "yes."

"And this is the tree of the present and the past."

"Yes."

"And let us suppose that the wives, mothers, daughters, and grandmothers are in my pocket."

"Yes."

"Note carefully how this clan has reproduced."

"Yes."

"Note the repeating pattern in each generation."

"..."

"This is a symbolic human tree. Next time we will give you a real example."

“Yes.” He takes out another patula tree. He cleans it and ties blank pieces of paper. “Don’t look at the second tree.” “Yes.” “Tell me now, how many sons is this man going to beget?”

” . . . “

Some in the back rows ask for God’s forgiveness while some in the middle start to roll their eyes—he convinces them that it is only a guess, a conjecture for scientific purposes. Some answer “six.” Others say, “three.” Others, “ten.” But he does not answer. He proceeds with his questions until he gets to the grandchildren, the grandchildren’s children and their children’s children. He brings the second tree next to the first as if pulling a rabbit out of his turban. The teeth of some begin to shine, others close their eyes, and the feet of some are heard stomping on the stairs, leaving him with the spectators taken by his shenanigans. Two years pass during which he undertook only ordinary projects, such as correcting genealogies, merging harmonious tribes, splitting quarreling tribes, breaking the branch of a depraved family, or exposing the lineage of a poor suitor. For two years no one inquired about his theories and ideas, so he realized that people were not very concerned with the future as they were preoccupied with correcting the past. He went even further, sharpened his mettle, and asked his assistants to not splurge when using coffee beans to print the trees. “Coffee is really expensive. Abridge the lineages of Elamites, Assyrians, and Arab Giants.” New rumors started to flow: a charlatan libertine tells the townsfolk about a time to come. He pollutes their minds and teaches them how to foresee their progeny and draw their future family trees. Women transmit his news as they scrub the scalps of their sons after the long days of drought in the wake of the Ḥamīdiyyah project¹²⁵ and the flow of water into the city. As a result, his theories cruise in the city’s channels and pipes. People fish them out and spice them up with their salty seasonings. Sayyid Aṣghar Akbar’s ideas become greater, longer, and juicier. They said he knew that Ya’qūb Battū, the paper merchant who lived in Kifl¹²⁶ with his Jewish relatives and extended family, would have a hardworking grandson who would run a large ministry, perhaps even the largest of ministries, in a state where only Jews are allowed to live. They said he said that the Secretary of Endowments, Mr. Nāṣir al-Dīn Effendi, would have a granddaughter whose hair would not reach her shoulders, and who would live in far off lands near England where she would dance in casinos and nightclubs like gypsy prostitutes.

They said he said that a third-class grandson would spring forth out of Fāliḥ al-Daffān’s wife, live in the land of snow, and become Minister of Oil, because in the land of snow they would create a ministry for oil. They said he said that the grandson of the esteemed religious scholar, Ḥasanayn Iṣfahānī, would become a great operator of a wondrous machine in Khurasan, a machine that would render people small and in two colors, black and white. The grandson of Ayatollah Iṣfahānī would move people in that machine very quickly, and make them walk or ride horses briskly. They said he said that the fourth grandson of Shaykh Abu Nu’mān, the senior Sufi in the Bektashi Order, would be blind and invent a small contraption that could spin tiny threads impossible to spin by the hands of those who can see. They said he said that the wife of the Philosophy of Illumination teacher¹²⁷ would give birth to a sterile daughter. Her first husband would divorce her and she would marry the teacher of the al-Ājrūmiyyah grammar primer,¹²⁸ who would also divorce her and beget from his other wife a cute boy who would travel to the land of the Russians and return with a red book in his pocket.¹²⁹ He listens to what people invent around him, he scratches his head that has lost its braids. He is taken by an enthusiasm to fulfill people’s wishes and make their rumors come true. He closes his doors and gives his assistants and Finjān Abū Naṣīḥah a two-month vacation. He pores over the patula trees, parsley bushes, and anemones, studying their structures. He leaves Najaf, its students and funerals, the battles between the tribes of Zugurt and Shumurt,¹³⁰ and the daily horrors made by the murmurs and whispers that portend a new Bedouin invasion.¹³¹ He shuts his door, fills his pipe with twigs from his favorite shrub, and disappears for two months

between a step in the past and a step in the future. The Turkish authorities pardon the rebels, and weddings and celebrations take place to commemorate the generosity of the Wālī. Bedouin invaders from the Arabian Peninsula pierce the wall of the city, making a hole large enough for their dwarf camels to pass through. An Abū Rubbiyah plague, which formerly had wiped out the population of gangsters in the city, returns to kidnap the souls of the scholars of Aristotelian logic. And he does not leave his house. The bell clock of the large tower¹³² stops, and a mechanic from the Shumurt tribe climbs its minaret. He is murdered by a bullet from the Zukurt tribe before he reaches the clock's skull, causing the clock to start working again as the mechanic falls dead. And he does not leave his house. The people, muezzins, and students complain about bones, ribs, and joints swimming in the waters of drinking wells and accumulating in the vaults. Nāṣir al-Dīn Effendi, the grandfather of the fourth grandson in the rumors, tells them that they are layers of old cemeteries collapsing beneath them. People believe him and return to their blissful sleep while the Secretary of Endowments, along with tens of workers, strip the floor of the Shrine of Imam 'Alī at night and exhume from its earth the unspoiled remains of Hulagu's children, old nuqabā',¹³³ princes, and sultans. They toss the remains in wells and vaults as ordered by the ruler, in preparation for shrine repairs. And he does not leave his house. He stays there, sketching, thinking, and reciting his private prayer, determined this time to correct his grand lie and shoot it in the air. Two weeks before the two months' passing, a dysentery epidemic takes him out of the house. It makes him wear a light yellow toga and a red headdress. It takes him roaming around perfumers, magicians, and Bektashi Sufis until he reaches a destination in Kufa: a saline, shallow well where people seek cures for their abdominal ailments. Mother Shamkhah said that he rode the Kufa-bound tramway in the last car, one which later became a children's train in the amusement park that was built over the cemetery. In the car's faraway and vacant corner he found, for the first time, your grandmother Rūmiyyah.¹³⁴ She was looking at the window, at the window and its frame. Nothing outside of it seemed to pique her interest. She was wearing a shawl with grey threads running through it. As for her 'abāyah, the goatskin comber had described it as "made of silk." She rode alone two days after a blabbering journalist published an article in the Najafi newspaper, *Al-Ḥabl al-matīn*,¹³⁵ attacking women who travel on the tramway. She came down from the train behind him, but he stopped and followed her. Meanwhile the wind hurried up behind them, revealing the contours of her back. The horse genealogist realized that he was racing a genuine mare. He went with her inside the roadhouse where the healing well had been dug up, but then lost track of her among the sounds of moaning and the tens of women holding their ulcerated bellies. He lost her there, losing his dysentery pains along with her, and left without drinking from the well. He saw her again in the last car on the way back, covering her white, round face with her palm, and covering her palm with her other palm. He went closer to her and tried to inhale her fragrance—her fragrance that still lingered in the boxes, bundles, and laps of the family women. He went closer still and dared to touch her small toe with his big toe. He feigned sleeping while standing. He feigned even more in his mind and went on touching the other toes. He felt like he was having sex for the first time in his life. He felt ink flow in his veins, a colorless ink that erased all of his thoughts and trees. He tried to hold on to his theory, but the ink permeated all of his pores, all of his inner canals and pathways. In a moment he had not accounted for, his theory melted away and his 'abāyah filled with wetness. The tramway stopped. He made way for Rūmiyyah, opening his arms and pointing toward the door. When he went down he did not notice her, as if she, too, melted away. He consoled himself that he would find her on the way back to his house. Yet when he arrived, went down to his vault, took off his 'abāyah and washed it, she still did not reappear and his theory did not reappear either. At dusk there was loud banging on his door. He put on his clothes, combed his sideburns and climbed the staircase of the vault in a few steps.

The door handle stuttered and did not aid his fumbling heart. The door stumbled too, and did not open easily. As if they were all conspiring with the great irony that fate was waging against

Aṣghar Akbar. No one was at the door, not the tramway girl or anyone else. He took two steps into the small street and then drew back and shut his door, seeking refuge from women and theories. Mother Shamkhah, said Aṣghar Akbar, was like vinegar; his starter was in and of itself. He spoiled himself and fixed it. He was able to put out Rūmiyyah's candle with ease, reignite his theory, and draw solid future trees. He created the women himself. In the worst case scenario for his personal tree, he would mingle with the notables, and they would wed their daughters to him. In the best case scenario, he would pick and choose and fall in love as he pleased. As for the flop he discerned in the incompleteness of his future tree, compared with some other trees that he drew, he took it for his destiny. This is how he reasoned and dispelled that gloom which filled his chest when he succeeded in drawing people's future pedigree while being challenged with his own case and miserably failing at it. He did not know, for instance, that his only son would beget Wāḥidiyyah, Naẓmah, and Mu'īnah—lonely, tactless spinsters—and that his line and memory would become obsolete much sooner than he could expect. "Someone is knocking on the door, Mu'īnah. Get up and open it, Mu'īnah." "Is it Rūmiyyah?" Mu'īnah goes up, convinced that Rūmiyyah was knocking on Aṣghar Akbar's door. We bang her on the head and forbid her to believe these illusions of the past. Wāḥidiyyah nips her ear as if trying to pull her head out of the world of galleys. We hear an elderly voice crawl toward us like a huge wounded beast. Mu'īnah returns and the voice continues crawling. "This house, the house of the Sister Wives . . ." Mu'īnah tells us that it is time for our meeting with the fake Ḥusayn Tammūzī.¹³⁶ We realize that this visitor is the person who made the appointment on the phone today. We cheer up and laugh. Blood rushes to our shriveled cheeks. There is a living visitor in our house. She was in her sixties, according to Wāḥidiyyah's estimate, a panting woman, with musk-flavored saliva flying out of her mouth. Minutes after her distressed words and muffled cries, we realized that she was the one who called us pretending to be Ḥusayn Tammūzī. And we knew before we moved closer that she was his mother. "Where is my son? Where is my son, daughters of the sister wives? I know he's here! There! What trouble did you get him mixed up with? What catastrophe?"

Translated from the Arabic by Yasmeen Hanoosh
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